

What happens when the world's food runs out?

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As the recent egg crisis in the USA showed, world food supply chains are intensely vulnerable and prone to failure as they are dependent upon monocultures. What will happen if they do fail?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PlkN5yHtxDc?si=KLhjFuW6ACs0IBFV>

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=6bzfi-186fdec-pb&from=pb6admin&s hare=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

What happens when the world's food runs out?

I ask the question because right now, we know that there is a crisis in egg supply in the USA. Nearly half of all chickens that were producing eggs in the USA either have been or are likely to be eliminated as a consequence of avian flu, and it could get even worse than that.

There's a knock-on effect with this in the European markets as well. Our egg prices have risen significantly, presumably because some of our egg production is being

diverted to the USA either as eggs, which seems unlikely, or in some form of processed form, which seems much more likely. But the consequence of this threat is that one of the staple products used to produce ultra-processed food around the world is no longer in ready supply. The food supply chain is being severely disrupted, and this, to me, is one of the big threats that we face in the world.

We know all about Putin.

We know all about what's happening in the USA with Trump.

We know about the threats that they create, and there are others all around the world.

But let's talk about something physical, real and with absolute consequence for everybody for a moment, which is our food supply.

When we rely upon a very few staple food products to support our physical existence, we are at risk.

Historically, one of the best examples of this came in Ireland in the 1840s. We all know - well, those of us who have studied Irish history, which, unsurprisingly, I have with a name like mine - know that at that time the potato crop in Ireland failed. It failed because of a disease called potato blight. It's common, it still exists, but at that point, it was so serious that a large part of the Irish potato crop failed.

And the Irish potato crop, along with milk, was the main source of sustenance for most of the poorest people in Ireland, of whom there were 8 million at that time, with the Irish population having never recovered since they died, as a large number of people did as a consequence.

There was absolutely no reason for that. There was sufficient wheat in Ireland to feed everyone. But the British government in London would not allow that wheat to be used for the purposes of relieving the famine that was arising amongst those who were dependent upon potatoes, meaning that what actually happened in Ireland was not a famine at all. It was a starvation or a genocide.

But the point I'm making is that when there was dependence on a monoculture and that monoculture failed, then so too did the well-being of that population to such an extent that literally millions died, and millions more left the country to try to find a means of sustenance. And as I say, Ireland changed forever as a result.

Do we face that same risk now in the world in which we live, precisely because we are so heavily dependent upon monocultures? There are still only four main foodstuffs around the world, on which most people rely for a significant part of their calorific intake. They are rice and maize and wheat and potatoes.

We can, of course, add alongside that certain other products like soya, which is very

important in many cases, and eggs if you like, and also some forms of meat, whether from cattle or pigs or chickens.

Now, whatever it is, all of those very limited number of sources of sustenance are intensely vulnerable to disease.

We know, for example, that one substance, which I admit is not core to wellbeing in terms of food, but which is incredibly commonly used, which is bananas, is intensely vulnerable to the risk of disease at present because of all the types of banana in the world that exists - and there are lots - we literally only consume one. And because we have so intensively cultivated it, it is now heavily vulnerable to disease.

Chickens are also heavily vulnerable disease, precisely because we have overbred them. And also cattle are similarly vulnerable to disease, as we saw not long ago.

All of this raises the question about the vulnerability that has been created to world food supply as a consequence of the industrial dependence upon monoculture to feed us via ultra-processed food. Nobody seems to be asking this question. What happens if any of these fail?

What happens if multiple sources of nutrition fail at the same time?

How do 8 billion people in the world get fed as a consequence, and what are the stresses that might come about as a result?

This is a fundamental question in political economy as far as I'm concerned, because the struggle over food, alongside the likely struggle that climate change is going to create over water, could shape world political economy over the coming decades.

We need to worry about monoculture.

We need to worry about ultra-processed food.

We need to worry about the fact that we are so heavily dependent upon processed food because we are literally being put at risk. As a result, our bodies might be suffering, but just as much, so might be the whole political infrastructure of the world, and this requires real answers to be found if we are to be truly resilient, which is what a proper food supply system should be.